

calmed down. They realised that it was altogether unnecessary to rush from their seats to do something after every brickbat in the press, but found out that a journalist, even an angry one, is only a journalist, and not His Excellency.

When I read in *Izvestia*, the second most important newspaper in our country, that the officials of the Moscow Regional Party Committee had refused to receive the newspaper's representative in connection with some scandalous affair, I called it a historic event. This is what liberalisation, to say nothing of democratisation, means! Having become even slightly free, a newspaper inevitably ceases just to be an organ of the state, and the natural foes of glasnost, administrators, are the first to notice this. They are the first to understand that a newspaper can be ignored. If an organ is free, it is not an organ any longer. The press which they dare to ignore openly must hail this fact as an important victory. This means recovery, a return to the norm. In accordance with this norm, the press has no option but to increase its pressure, to augment the flow of information, so that it becomes impossible to ignore.

'Information is not matter and not energy, and a materialist who does not understand this is doomed', Wiener said.

Indeed, information is not matter and not energy, but a loss of information means a loss of matter and energy. The Soviet Union has provided ample evidence of this.

When an uneducated but gifted soldier of ours, who became a General during the Second World War, was asked about the secret of his successes, he answered: 'There are four factors essential to the art of warfare: the rear, communication, intelligence, and protection. The weakness or absence of any of these factors brings to naught the strength of all the others, and a unit suffers defeat or perishes. Information accounts for two out of these four factors (a half!). I repeat, not matter or energy, but information, without which both matter and energy are nothing.'

We can't quite yet say that the fathers of our perestroika have come to understand the real importance of information, but at least some of them have certainly come to suspect it.

As for rethinking the role of the press, its original role should in my view remain unchanged, that is, it should simply be the press. It may sometimes be corrupt, thoughtless or biased, but it must be a press, i.e. a free receptacle of information and opinions. Corruption, thoughtlessness and bias are not only weak points but also signs of life, evidence that the press is free. An unfree press cannot be corrupt, frivolous or biased; it is always what the authorities order it to be. ■

Yelena Vorontsova

Women writers in Russia

Why have so few women writers achieved prominence in Russian prose? Why are there virtually no women in the literary bureaucracy? A Moscow author describes the obstacles faced by the 'trustworthy cart horses' of Soviet literature — and the reasons why women writers have often been more 'honest' than men

My schoolboy son once asked me, 'Why are most of our women writers poets? He was thinking of Marina Tsvetaeva and Anna Akhmatova. The answer I gave him went something like this:

In every language, literature begins with poetry. First of all, storytellers make up heroic epics and songs about their people, and then poets come along and take their place. The first great Russian poet was Pushkin, and he opened the way for everyone else, for prosewriters and poets alike. It was probably the same for women writers. They are like another, separate nation. When the time came for them to speak, in Russian, their first great words came from the mouths of poets like Marina Tsvetaeva and Anna Akhmatova.

Women and men have different positions in society, I went on, and so it is natural that in some ways they should see things differently. When they write, women try to use words in a way that expresses their own way of seeing things. To begin with, it is probably easier for them to do this in poetry, which is more purely based on inspiration. But if poetry is the key to the door of literature, why haven't there been equally talented women prosewriters since Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva?

A little about the position of women in the Soviet Union might help to answer this question.

The Revolution gave women equal rights. The Communists promised them a part in managing the state and the economy. They said that all walks of life should be open to women, that they should be released from domestic drudgery, and should no longer be oppressed by men in any way. 'Equality before the law does not automatically guarantee equality in everyday life', said Lenin.

In the early years of the Soviet regime, women urban workers, female students at the 'Rabfaks', as they called the general schools for workers, and the peasant girls all tried to

put the words of the Communists into practice. My father's sister, for example, organised a collective farm in her village in 1926. She persuaded about 30% of the families in the village that this new way of life would be better for them. Her voluntary *kolhoz* existed without harming anyone until Stalin introduced compulsory collectivisation in 1929. When the authorities deprived my aunt's collective of its independence, they had no further use for her, its independent chairwoman, either. My aunt never got involved in such public activities again. Like most peasant women, she wore herself out working in the fields, and soon after the war, having raised three children, she died after a life of backbreaking work and endless worry.

During the '30s, the propaganda machine persisted doggedly in proclaiming the equality of women. As before, women were called on to perform ever greater and loftier tasks; they were taught to fly aeroplanes and made into People's Deputies. But all the highfalutin talk and new appointments had nothing to do with real equality. The Deputies had no real power, and the women among them, like the women pilots, were just there for show. All this was done so that people would believe in the Party, so that no one would doubt for a minute its humane pronouncements, so that workers in the West would dream of having their own Soviet Socialist paradise. And Feuchtwanger and Romain Rolland, along with the rest of the European Left-wing intelligentsia, were moved to shed a few sentimental tears.

There was another reason for all this talk about sexual equality. It effectively masked the cruel exploitation of women at work. There were campaigns to recruit women to drive tractors, to wield sledgehammers, to work on building sites and in steel foundries in burning temperatures. They worked, of course, not just out of some noble Communist impulse, but because — with agriculture ruined by collectivisation, and the acute food shortages in the towns — they had to feed themselves somehow. All this deception and self-deception only aggravated their real entrapment in everyday life.

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USSR Women writers

Girls wanted to study. With the Revolution came universal free education. The brightest girls headed eagerly for jobs worthy of their talents, but it was hard for them to get to the top in areas like science and industrial management. The new regime did nothing to liberate them from petty, exhausting domestic drudgery. There were not enough nursery schools, maternity leave was minimal, and daily wages were pitifully low. In all the professions women, as a rule, remained the underdogs. They didn't get the director's or professor's chair, but had to make do with being teachers, run-of-the-mill engineers or blue-collar workers.

This state of affairs perfectly suited the new regime. Stalin had a penchant for patriarchy,

and reinstated single-sex schools which had been abolished by the Bolsheviks in 1917. Abortion was made illegal, and it became harder to get divorced. I remember very well how, at the beginning of the 1950s, all the girls at my single-sex school had to wear their hair in long plaits. If you had your hair cut it was regarded as the first step towards depravity.

Then Stalin died, in 1953, and Khrushchev condemned his practices. The moral climate of the country began to change, and the position of women was affected, too. People began to say that it was barbaric for women to be made to use a crowbar or a sledgehammer; that they should be relieved of heavy manual labour, that more nurseries should be provided, social services im-

proved. Maternity leave was slightly increased, abortion legalised, divorce made easier. But, just as before, no-one told the truth: that real equality, promised us once upon a time, had never materialised.

What? No equality? When women are elected as Deputies, and one has even been sent on a space mission? Our propagandists conjured with statistics: compared with the Capitalist world, they claimed, we had the highest proportion of female engineers, female doctors, and female writers. But no-one ever mentioned what their work actually entailed, what wages they received and how these compared with the average wages of men with equivalent qualifications. Soviet society was not yet prepared to discuss these matters. Most people were accustomed to the army-style patriarchal system, and it seemed natural to them that men should be in command everywhere.

In the 1960s I worked on the most influential young people's newspaper in the country. Most of my male colleagues nurtured ambitions to become chief editors. I never even dreamt of it. That path, I knew, was closed to me. A woman can become the head of an educational publishing house. That is acceptable and it bolsters the figures proving that women bosses do exist. But a woman in charge of a major journal or newspaper? I've never heard of a single case. The quota for women working in the prestigious establishments is strictly observed. The usual (unofficial) explanation goes like this: 'But we already have one Jew, two non-Party members, two women ...'

Over the last 20 years there has been constant debate in the press about the 'women's question', but what it has usually boiled down to is the rather primitive question: 'Will a man still be a man if he does a share of the cleaning, and can a woman still be a woman if her main interests are transferred from the family to work?' Back in real life, women have gone on coping with alcoholic husbands, standing in queues, and dropping from exhaustion. Newspapers and journals, attempting to revive the old ideals of the patriarchal family, have meanwhile called on women to be kind, patient and forgiving with their errant husbands, like so many Penelopes with their Odysseuses. Even now, when we are making a new beginning in the Soviet Union, the time is not yet ripe for the 'women's question' to be approached in a modern and civilised way. There was nothing unusual in the wisecrack answer with which one of our famous male writers, with the reputation of a good soldier in the campaign for perestroika, laughed off the enquiries of a western reader about women writers. Well, he said, men may be better writers, but women were meant for other things...

Fortunately, not everyone would agree with him. Another writer, who is also quite



Tatyana Tolstaya

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Women writers USSR

well-known and respected in progressive circles, said to me recently that, looking back, it would seem that the conscience of women writers is more powerful than that of men, and that they write more candidly...

There are several perfectly good explanations for the honesty of women writers. I can name one which may seem something of a cliché but is actually a good one. We are all susceptible to temptation. Women writers in the Soviet Union know that, however much they compromise their conscience, they will never get a lucrative position in the literary hierarchy. It simply isn't done to give them one. There are virtually no women directors in the Writers' Union. They get no real share of the editorial cake or the profitable trips abroad. They simply sit at their desks and go on working to the extent that their talent, brains and family circumstances allow. In other words, the lives of most of our women writers exist quite apart from the haggling and trickery that enshrouds the ambitious literary bureaucracy — so women are less prone to be corrupted and spoiled.

Among women writers, just as among men, there are both hacks and genuine talents. But one cannot simply divide their work into 'trash' and 'non-trash', because although the degree of talent varies among women writers, almost all of them, like zealous schoolgirls, approach their task very seriously, and in that sense none of their work can be entirely dismissed. In all fields of work — in industry, science and education as well as literature — fate has not smiled kindly upon women. But they have laboured on, like trusty cart-horses pulling their load. Among them are ladies who address themselves to young people, in tedious and insipid tones, on the subject of morals; there are those who compose violent melodramas and sensitive love stories. But there are also plenty of serious writers. Reviews of their books rarely appear in the press, nor are their works printed in the largest editions. But the works of the most talented among them are awaited eagerly by the reading public, they sell out quickly and sometimes become a sensation.

For the last 30 years or so Irina Grekova has occupied an important position in the lives of the Soviet reading public. She emerged at the time of Khrushchev's Thaw. Her first short story, *Damskii Master*, immediately created a sensation. In it, in kindly and humorous terms, she told of the world of the 'underdog', a forbidden topic in Soviet literature under Stalin. The heroine was a ladies' hairdresser. At a time when the model heroes of Soviet literature were still supposed to be steelworkers, pilots or engineers, a story about a hairdresser seemed astonishing, in a way that is almost unimaginable now.

Later, it turned out that Grekova did have something to say about engineers, and military ones in particular. She is a



Irina Grekova.

mathematician by profession, a Doctor of Sciences, and she taught for a long time at the Military Flying Academy. She has written several textbooks, and her doctoral thesis was on bombardment. Following her story about the hairdresser, Grekova wrote about her colleagues. One of her stories, *Za prohodnoy* ('Behind the scenes'), deals with daily life in the military scientific research institute, another, *Na ispytaniakh* ('Experiments'), is about people engaged in testing new weapons. Grekova was accused of libelling the entire technology profession. She was sacked from her job at the Military Flying Academy, and since then has devoted herself solely to writing fiction. The two major themes of her work have continued to be the everyday lives of the technological

'To establish their talent women writers needed freedom, but there was none'

intelligentsia, and the problems faced by the underdogs of Soviet society. Grekova is now almost 80 years old, and perhaps she will not be able to write much more. But I would like to draw attention to the fact that it was she, a woman, who first spoke up honestly about the 'secret' lives of scientists.

As yet, books written by women still occupy a relatively modest place in Soviet literature as a whole. Women tend to steer clear of the political intrigues of literary life, and their views tend to be more democratic than those of many renowned male writers. But the most talented of them are even more hard-nosed and merciless than their male counterparts. The harshness of a woman's life is not conducive to sentimentality. The squalid, overburdened lives of these writers'

heroines, which present only a grim prospect for the future, leave the reader little room for illusions about the nature of patriarchal society. That is why it was so difficult for these women writers to get their works published under Brezhnev. Probably in the West people have heard most about the ordeals of Tatyana Tolstaya and Ludmila Petrushevskaya (see *Index* 7/1987 pp8-13 and *Index* 6/1988). Until recently their works were not published at all. But there have been others besides them who have found it difficult to overcome the lack of understanding, the prejudice and indifference of the literary bureaucrats. If democratisation continues in the USSR, then the voice of women's literature will ring out more clearly.

Our women writers have much to live up to. Tsvetaeva and Akhmatova began their creative lives before the Revolution, and I think it would be fair to say that those who came afterwards were not to blame if life did not give them the opportunity to fulfil their potential. To establish their talent they needed freedom, but there was none.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about one gifted writer who is now no longer alive. Anna Barkova's first and only collection of poetry was greeted with enthusiasm 70 years ago by the symbolist poet, Alexander Blok. Since then not a single line of Barkova's work was published until this autumn, when the weekly magazine *Ogonyok* published a small selection of her poems and related her life-story. Anna Barkova spent 25 years of her life in prisons and labour camps. She was incarcerated for the first time in 1934, and received her last sentence in 1957, under Khrushchev. As *Ogonyok* pointed out, her sole 'crime' consisted of a few careless lines in a personal letter. Ten years after being rehabilitated, Barkova died in complete obscurity. Delirious during her last weeks in hospital, she believed that she was back in prison, began to call the ward her 'cell' and, 10 days before she died, leapt from her bed in a fever and ran into the corridor suffering from the hallucination that the 'prisoners' were being rounded up for a trip to the bath-house and she was going to be left behind...

'I was crushed and flattened in the mud by the senseless weight of the wheel', wrote Barkova in one of her poems. Even the tiny selection of poems published in *Ogonyok* demonstrates the talent that was indeed crushed.

'Steppe and sky, and a wild wind, ruin,
misery, depravity.

O God Almighty, I see that there is also an
almighty Hell.

But Hell is not out there beyond the grave,
but here, surrounding me:

A senseless blizzard of evil, more burning
than pitch and fire.' ■

Translated from the Russian by Jessy Kaner